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ABSTRACT

Many college students, unaware of how their writing strikes others and unaccustomed to an audience of college teachers, try to write with sophistication or profundity with little success. These students need the experience of writing for an audience that talks back; one that is diverse, has a strong reason to be frank in its criticism and praise, includes the student whose paper is being examined so that he or she will also become a critical reader and learn to trust his or her judgment, and also includes a friendly but knowledgeable instructor. The best way to provide a student writer with such an audience is to divide the composition course into an equal number of classroom weeks and group tutorial weeks. In the tutorials, students meet in small groups with the instructor to discuss each participant's essay. Such an intense, intimate critique can drastically reduce the time required to solve the problems encountered in the essays. Confronted with a real audience, students become more conscious of their presentation of themselves, their world view and their ethos, and more thoughtful students often reveal and refine strong beliefs that underlie all their essays. The revision accomplished by this teaching method forces student writers to examine their writer's personae, and sometimes their day-to-day personalities, from a new perspective. (HTH)

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Group Tutorials: Teaching Students to Present Themselves in Writing

D.G. Hunt

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Group Tutorials: Teaching Students to Present Themselves in Writing

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This August, on the day before classes began, I found a student walking around the campus depressed about a paper she had to finish to complete an exposition course. The paper was an interpretation of John Cheever's short story "The Enormous Radio." The student, whom I'll call Jane, had never written a critical essay, nor, apparently, had any friend she could talk to. She didn't know what Cheever was driving at and she didn't know what her teacher wanted, but she told me that both Cheever and her teacher demanded something "deep." So for a month, alone in her small Missouri town, she had read and re-read the story and tried to construct a "deep" paper. She noticed that there were some color words in the story, and she counted them: three reds, four blues, one brown, etc. She carefully noted the numbers that were mentioned and the number of times each number was mentioned. These and other trifling efforts may have occupied her for a week. But she soon found a "deeper" method of analysis. She noticed that many words besides color and number words appeared repeatedly. She began to count the number of times the word the occured: there were dozens, of course. A and an were also frequent. But what most struck her was the number of words that occured ten times in the story. This provided the key for her interpretation. The number ten, she discovered, was a disguised form of the word tin, which was an allusion to the Tin Man. The story was, therefore, a cryptic retelling of The Wizard of Oz.

Now Jane's case is clearly extreme, but in some ways it is typical. Most students try on new roles while they are in college. Jane, who told me she was "knocked out" by the way her psychology professor could wrap himself in a cloud of obscure statistics and draw astonishing conclusions, was probably imitating him in her paper. Other students write papers that display their new-found radicalism, or cynicism, or feminism, or sophistication. These unfamiliar rhetorical clothes rarely fit well, and whether the clothes are old or new, few students will have had adequate mirrors to examine them in. I know that I was nineteen years old before anyone looked closely enough at something I had written to tell me that what I thought was clever struck him as childish. Students with more experience than I had may nonetheless be bewildered when they must write for college teachers. A student once brought me a history essay which he had failed because he had included no details. When I asked him why, he said that the teacher already knew "that stuff," and that he didn't want to bore her. It isn't surprising that students like Jane, uncertain of who they are, unaware of how their writing strikes others, and unused to an audience of college teachers, should try to look profound, but succeed only in looking outlandish or even crazy.

Even the best textbook is not much help to a student caught in these swamps of rhetoric. What students need is not general advice, but the experience of writing a pencil or two to the nub trying to please an audience that talks back.

Let's consider for a moment how such an audience should be constituted. First, since most college freshmen carry with them a bundle of unexamined assumptions, there should be as much diversity

in the group as possible. The fraternity boy must learn that his tales of Olympian beer busts may amuse his brothers, but will leave other people cold. The sweet young thing needs to read her syrupy prose to an engineer. The congenital optimist should hear a skeptic assess his paper. Second, the group should have some strong reason to be frank in their criticism and their praise. They should give it immediately and orally and publically, so that its impact will be undiluted. Third, the student himself should be an active member of the group, a part of the audience when his paper is not being discussed. Until he becomes a critical reader, his assumptions about what audiences like will be guesses, and we have seen in Jane's case the quagmire that may lie beneath a bad guess. When he joins the group as a critic he will find, to his relief, that there is a generous overlap between his tastes and the tastes of others. He may learn to trust his judgment and to avoid being artificially "deep." Fourth, at least one "presentable teacher" should be a member of the group, someone who is a part of the academic community that students seem to find so intimidating, someone who may be friendly but is clearly not a chum.

Some enthusiasts of group methods will disagree with me here and will say that such a teacher is just the sort of person who ought never appear in a group because his presence is bound to be obtrusive. But the teacher serves a valuable purpose beyond the obvious one of providing information. He creates an environment in which one side of every student's personality can safely venture out, the side that wants to do something extraordinary, to cut a perfect sentence, to tackle a hard topic, to bring a little unexpected learning to bear. Too often students are reluctant to

disclose to their peers any desire to excell in their school work. They are afraid that someone will ask whom they are trying to impress. With a teacher present, they have an excuse for standing on tiptoe. But at the same time the teacher can keep this desire for excellence within sensible bounds. Jane, after all, got into trouble because she had for too long kept pent up within her a silly notion of what excellence means to an academic. If she could read a half dozen essays to her teachers and get their opinions on them, she would surely find that eighteen or twenty years of education does not necessarily turn a person into a Martian with a calculator brain who thinks that a short story can never mean what it seems to mean.

There are many ways to provide the student with an audience of the sort I have described. The one I know best divides the syllabus into an equal number of classroom weeks and tutorial weeks. The classroom weeks are devoted to the usual stuff of a composition class: grammar, discussions of the reader and the rhetoric, in-class essays, etc. In tutorial weeks the students come to my office in groups of three or four, each group balanced as far as possible for sex, ability, and disposition. There they have a long tutorial, ninety minutes ordinarily, in which each student distributes copies of his assigned essay, then reads it aloud. Immediately after reading, the writer makes some comments on his essay, then listens to the comments of each member of the group. There are some strong motives for useful comments. First, the author always has an opportunity to revise, so that the most negative comment may be the most useful. Next everyone knows that there is a quid pro quo, that the student kind enough to

point out organizational flaws in Marie's paper will be rewarded by Marie's pointing out stylistic flaws in his own. Finally, everyone knows that I am recording a daily grade for class participation.

Students accustomed to the comfortable anonymnity of the classroom sometimes find these small-group tutorials an intense experience. There is no back row to hide on. A student rarely has the luxury of sitting silently for as long as five minutes at a stretch. A student reading his paper will hear every yawn or giggle or foot-shaking from every member of his audience, and in an afternoon tutorial he may smell the onion on the breath of his critic. The tutorial classroom becomes a fairly intimate world in which the student writer sits, as literally as possible, knee-to-knee with an audience that includes his teacher.

This is, in the very best sense, a pressure cooker of a classroom, one which may cut the stewing time of a tough problem dramatically. Take, for example, the case of Suzie Ewall, a student of a sort I find particularly difficult. On the first day of class, she wrote the following answer to the question, "What do you plan to do with your university education?" The spelling is meticulous:

> I plan to teach at the elementary level. I also would like to give cheerleading lessons. I am the head cheerleader for the university. I hope to some day take a cruise to the Bahamas with my entire family. Some day I plan to get married and have four children. Hopefully, I would like to go to the World's Fair and to the Olympics. I would like to live in a big house in California so I can live by the ocean.

I suspected immediately that Suzie's subsequent papers would be well-spelled nothings, and her first out-of-class paper confirmed the suspicion. In response to Mina Shaugnessy's question, "How do you expect your life to differ from your parents' lives?," she produced this opening paragraph:

> A good example of proper living is well represented at my home. My mother and father are perfect examples of two wonderful parents. There are few faults in my upbringing. Therefore, I plan to pattern my life after theirs.

The paper was developed with a shallowness that teachers may grind their teeth over, but can do very little to overcome. To insist on more depth or thought might only confirm the suspicion--which Suzie seemed to share with Jane--that teachers are extraterrestrial beings with inscrutable tastes.

Fortunately, the next paper was read out at a tutorial. The assignment was a description of a person whom everyone in the tutorial, including the teacher, would find interesting. Suzie picked her boyfriend Tom and did an entirely physical description. We got his gleeming white teeth, his tall, muscular body, his Izod shirts, his Calvin Klein jeans, his Nike shoes, and his lips as soft as rose petals. One of her tutorial partners laughed a little, nervous laugh on the sentence about the rose petal lips, and Suzie blushed a little blush. At the end of the reading this fellow admitted, somewhat reluctantly, that he didn't find the paper interesting: "What do I care about Calvin Kleins and lips as soft as rose-petals? I'm not a girl." I just nodded and said I saw what he meant. The other student in the tutorial went this comment one better. "I guess this guy must be all right

if Suzie likes him, but I don't like him at all. He sounds like he could be self-centered or something." There were not very teacherly comments, but Suzie probably learned more from them than from all that she read in her textbook that semester. Faced with them, she quickly agreed that the paper needed to get beneath the brand-name exterior and present the boyfriend's character as well. When she brought the second draft back next week, there were two new paragraphs. One described Tom's befriending a nervous sixteen-year-old who hadbacked into his Corvette. The other showed Tom missing a job interview because he stopped to help a lost child he found crying in the street. The tutorial partners were lavish in their praise of these paragraphs, and Suzie positively beamed. Her efforts to please a real audience had forced her a bit beyond the superficiality of her usual writing and, perhaps, of her usual thinking.

Suzie's case gives us in a miniature what I take to be a great virtue for the group tutorial method. Confronted with a real audience, students become more conscious of their presentation of themselves, their world view, their ethos. Suzie, for instance, found that she was presenting not only her boyfriend but herself as someone superficial, lacking in values, and she decided that the picture needed correction.

More thoughtful students often reveal and refine strong beliefs that underlie all their essays. Take Dan, a student struggling against enormous odds, a dyslexic so far behind his classmates in social development and poise that he was too often the butt of their jokes. One theme lay beneath almost all the essays he wrote last semester: That the bottom man can overcome

every obstacle by perseverence. I doubt that he was ever entirely conscious of this theme, but I watched him try it out on his tutorial partners week after week, and I watched his tutorial partners insist that he rethink it, refine it, become less of a Pollyanna about it. For example, his paper about an interesting person was about his uncle who "had the ingenuity, personality, and foresight to excell from the orange groves in Anaheim, California to the vice presidency of Disneyland." On the first draft our discussion of this paper focused on technical problems. But on the second draft, one of Dan's tutorial partners--who was irritated by the paper's tone--found an inconsistency in the portrait of the uncle. Uncle was, it is true, a Hispanic-American orange-juice seller as a boy, but his juice stand stood amid 14,000 acres his family was about to sell to Walt Disney. The tutorial partner wanted to know whether the story really showed hard work leading from rags to riches, or whether it showed wealth begetting wealth. Dan revised his paper to being it slightly closer to the truth about his fortunate uncle and slightly further from the myth of the bottom man.

When Dan approached a rather tough assignment, a commentary on Woody Guthrie's folksongs, his private myth once again became cumbersome baggage. Guthrie's songs, as you know, distill all the gloom of the Great Depression, and for two pages, Dan faced this gloom stoutly. Then the bottom man myth began to emerge in a paragraph that mentions Guthrie's song "I Ain't Gonna Be Treated This Way."

> . . . people started getting disgusted with the way things were going for them. So as always when Americans start getting disgusted, they put their foot down and said

"I Ain't Gonna Be Treated This Way." The people started caring about other people again, as they once had. As in spring, like a flower gone dormant for the winter, unity and love started to bloom once again.

He then gave a sweet, Disneyesque interpretation of "Pretty Boy Floyd" and "Union Maid," two of Guthrie's songs about violence between the rich and poor. The tutorial partners were having none of this. One gave Dan a passionate and roughly accurate view of the desperation of the 1930's and questioned his blithe talk about "unity and love." The other insisted that we read through "Union Maid" to see if the "guards and ginks and company finks" showed the harmony Dan talked about. They were polite in their objections, but they were firm. In the revised version, when the American people get disgusted they don't wish upon a star-they revolt. And Pretty Boy Floyd and the Union Maid are presented as tough customers rather than fairy godmothers.

For Dan and Suzie and the majority of students I have taught by the group method, revision has been re-vision in two senses. First, it has forced them to examine their writerly personae--and sometimes their day-to-day personalities--from a new perspective. In later tutorials, Dan was inclined to prod his group with questions like, "Does that paragraph sound too 'golly-gee?'" Second, it has forced students to examine pet ideas in the strong light and open air of public discussion. Without this public scrutiny, such ideas might become hobbyhorses like Jane's word-counting. The group method does not seem to encourage students to play it safe, to hide their personalities or their

their opinions. Instead, it gives them a stage where they can act them out over and over, looking for a favorable reaction. Dan, for instance, danced a jig in the street outside my office one day. He had labored long and hard and successfully in an attempt to present Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 as the story of the bottom man, the man "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" psychologically overcoming every obstacle until his state "sings hymns at heaven's gate." He pursued this theme without very much bathos, overstatement, or plain "golly-gee." Even the tutorial partners, those habitual sourpusses, found things to like in this paper. In fact, one of the unexpected pleasures of the semester was watching their growing appreciation of Dan as a writer and a person.

I have been concentrating on the advantages of the group method for students. Let me conclude by mentioning an advantage it has for me. After seven years of teaching composition, I have begun to buoy my spirits with certain totems: a copy of Strunk and White in my coat pocket, an aging but excellent student paper in my desk, and a quotation from Newman's "The Idea of a University" on my bulletin board. I can see the Newman quote when I tutor:

> [A University education] give a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go directly to the point.... It shows him how to accomodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an

understanding with them, how to bear with them.
The group tutorial method allows me the illusion, at least, that my classroom is inching toward Newman's ideal.